

Chromatic mutations in suburban areas

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ABSTRACT

Urban sprawl produces hybrid territories, neither urban nor rural, which superimpose to old structures or extend them, hence creating very complex visual environments. Quite strikingly suburbanisation, which has been taking place over several decades, has also generated areas characterized by specific chromatic palettes, breaking radically away from usual palettes of traditional cities. The important chromatic mutations occurring in suburban areas have not yet attracted much scientific interest. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to describe emerging chromatic palettes that can be observed in suburban areas so as to show how new colour arrangements, largely designed along market demand and offer, change our daily environment which influences consumers and residents behaviours. Two specific types of suburban areas will be investigated: “franchised” commercial zones and periurban housing districts.

1. INTRODUCTION: NEW COLOURS OF URBAN SPRAWL

Urban sprawl is commonly used to describe physically expanding urban areas. (...) Sprawl is the leading edge of urban growth and implies little planning control of land subdivision. Development is patchy, scattered and strung out, with a tendency for discontinuity. It leapfrogs over areas, leaving agricultural enclaves. (European Environment Agency 2006: 6)

Individual motorisation shaped the city during the last century: from a compact configuration, the city developed a diffuse and informal aspect, not clearly limited. Automobile dependence became a feature in those suburban zones: the use of an automobile became not so much a choice but a necessity (Newman et al. 1999). Urban sprawl produces hybrid territories, neither urban nor rural, which superimpose to old structures or extend them, hence creating very complex visual environments. The process of sprawl concerns a large part of the territory and continues to grow at an unprecedented rate.

Starting with the hypothesis that each historical architectural epoch has its own chromatic ranges and that the city is ‘chromatically polynuclear’ (Garcia-Codoner et al. 2009), the main purpose of this paper is to highlight the emerging colour palettes which reveal the urban mutations over several decades. In spite of these profound changes, the description of structures and forms in suburban areas are rather deficient (Mangin 2004). In the same way, the important chromatic mutations occurring in these zones have not yet attracted much scientific interest. Most existing publications focus on the colour of historic cities, in search for heritage values and collective identities expressed by traditional colours.

Two specific types of suburban areas will be investigated: “franchised” commercial zones and periurban housing districts. Both zones meet specific planning logics, deeply inspired from the American model, in which new colour arrangements, largely designed along market demand and offer, change our daily environment which influences consumers and residents behaviours.



Figures 1-2. “Franchised” commercial zone and periurban housing district (Liège, Belgium).

2. “FRANCHISED” COMMERCIAL ZONES

Making its first appearance in the US, the commercial zone model (including shopping centers and entertainment areas) is located outside the city and connected to the road network. It is characterized by these basic requirements: accessibility, land availability and visibility. Commercial zones grow along highways and near interchanges, allowing dual access, on one hand for deliveries and on the other hand for customers with cars (Fellmann et al. 1997). The main purpose is definitely to encourage consumption and the use of coloured devices therefore finds its *raison d’être* in the commercial competition: each franchise has to be more present, more readable to attract the consumers.

There are two kinds of commercial buildings. Most of them can be considered as “decorated sheds”, according to Robert Venturi (Venturi et al. 2007). They appear as disordered volumes, with low variety of forms and covered with garish colours, separated from each other with parkings (Gibout 1997). In some other cases, saturated colours cover the entire building: the outer shell representing the brand and reciprocally the brand being identified by the façade. They are symbols just as Venturi’s “duck” building.

The common denominator of commercial zones is an apparent profusion of signs with over-saturated colours, breaking radically away from usual palettes of traditional cities where a monochromatic trend can be observed (Nguyen et al. 2011). Such colour patterns have an impact on the automobile visual kinetic; in spite of the obvious mess, colour plays a part in space memorization. Inspired from the world of comics and advertising, the colour patterns are being used to confer some form of visual identity to places and buildings. These are identifiable at large distance, because these colour codes are engraved in the consumer’s memory (due to media hype) as a kind of “alerts”, so that he is able to recognise reassuring consumption habits.

3. PERIURBAN HOUSING DISTRICTS

The individual house symbolizes the dream of home ownership. In these peripheral zones, life is idealized: more security, quieter, closer to nature, a “small city” or “village” atmosphere (Mancebo 2007). Periurban housing districts appear as enclosed areas that break away from the context (the extreme forms being identified as gated communities), but are not absolutely isolated from work and commercial facilities, the car having made it possible to keep the connection. They have largely been idealized in advertising, movies and American TV shows.

Chromatic palettes of housing districts are basically the results of sociocultural and economic factors. Developers often use the same local picturesque palette of colours based on pastel shades (yellowish or reddish) with little variation. Scenic and popular values, which

can be associated with the post-modern theory, are reflected in housing districts, to attract the largest number of potential residents. In this way, it is not surprising that the rise of post-modernism in the 70's and 80's corresponds to the period of development of these "pavilion" areas.

The postmodern reaction of the 1970s and 1980s brought about a host of architects concerned with the references to history and to the environment, and color in architecture also acquired a new meaning under these orientations. (Caivano 2006: 357)

Then in the eighties, under the rise of post-modernism, colour became suddenly suspect. Post-modernism wanted to dignify the world with real materials – granite, travertine, marble – only beige or a purplish colour like brick were considered as 'classy' and sufficiently mature. (Koolhaas 1999: 14)

Many housing settlements are hence characterized by uniform chromatic palettes, even though the periurban model would somehow address a quest for more individuality. This illustrates the existing contradiction between the demand formally expressed by inhabitants and the resulting visual environment as provided by the market (Mangin 2004).

4. TOWARD A GENERALIZED CHROMATIC PALETTE

The process of urban sprawl and the chromatic mutations which accompany this phenomenon are not expected to be reverted in a short time frame. This evolution affects all parts of the territories in which new spatial configurations infiltrate, split, crush, and replace old ones. Two types of specific chromatic palettes in suburban areas have been discussed, the over-saturated colours in the commercial zones and the pastel shades in the housing districts. Despite their different appearances, both colour patterns act in a similar purpose: attracting the prospective buyers of consumer goods and houses, with the use of visual flashy signals and "post-modern" popular values.

In many cases, we can find coexistence between commercial zones and housing districts in a fragment of territory, flashy and pastel palettes alternating or juxtaposing (Figure 3).

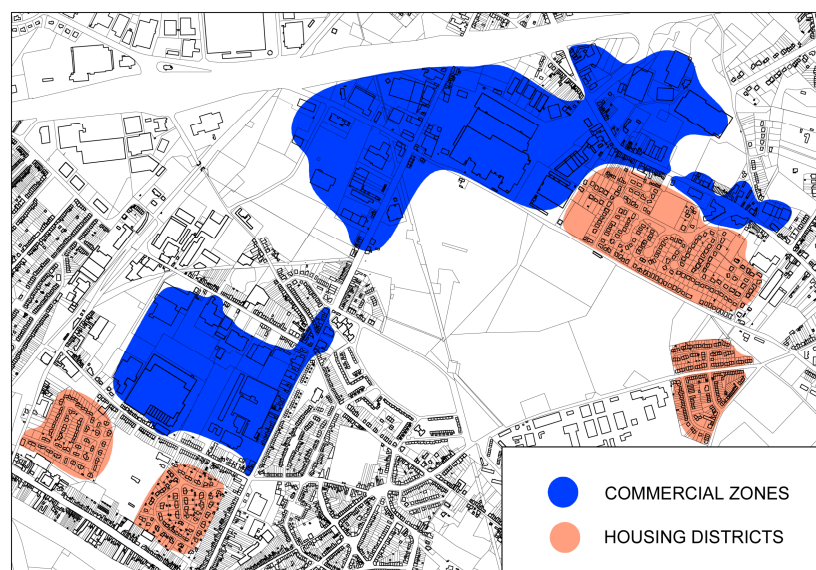


Figure 3. Coexistence between commercial zones and housing districts in an urban fragment (Liège, Belgium).

Moreover, the periurban devices move in the heart of cities: mass-market products (international retailers, leisure areas, hotel chains) settle in the centers while housing districts take place in the former industrial wastelands to form residential enclaves.

The chromatic mutations tend to become widespread and, as a result of economic development and globalization, a dilution of traditional models can be expected in the built environment to form indefinable hybrid colour patterns mixing new and old palettes. This will result in a loss of identity and coherence in urban territories, in conjunction with a cultural homogeneity of lifestyles.

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